Community-Based Job Training

In December 1946, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) became the first specialized agency associated with the United Nations. Originally, it had been established in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles, as an independent institution associated with the League of Nations. The ILO works to promote decent standards of living, satisfactory conditions of work and pay, and adequate employment opportunities for working people everywhere.

During the UN Decade of Disabled Persons, the ILO has developed community-based methods to address the employment needs of disabled people. ILO's technical cooperation projects have assisted the development of community-based programmes providing vocational skills and employment to disabled people in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nicaragua, Nigeria, the Philippines, Swaziland, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The experience of 44-year-old Helman Senza of Malawi illustrates the success of ILO's community-based approach. When Helman was eight, an attack of poliomyelitis left him with paralysed legs. His parents were farmers subsisting on a small piece of land 20 kilometres from Lilongwe. There were no medical services in his village and, with no access to medicine or therapy, Helman's conditions worsened. His weakened legs atrophied and the boy had to drag himself around on his hands and knees. As he grew older he remained dependent upon his parents, but they could afford only to feed him; sending him to school was beyond their means.

When his parents died in the mid-1980s, Helman, at 39, was alone, dejected and vulnerable. Villagers advised him to go to the city to beg. None of them thought that a man with such a disability could earn a living. Eventually, Malawi Against Polio, a charitable organization, gave him a tricycle wheelchair. But without job skills, he could not earn money to buy food.

Travelling on his tricycle, Helman visited a nearby village where people were gathered to hear a talk. "I found myself at a meeting where a gentleman was explaining about a new programme to help people like me, right in their homes. He was also encouraging the rest of the community to help disabled people," he explained. Helman Senza had attended the first meeting convened by a community rehabilitation volunteer to announce a community-based rehabilitation programme of the Malawi Council for the Handicapped, assisted by the ILO and the United Nations Development Programme.

Dalison Makhundize, the volunteer, worked out a rehabilitation plan with Helman. They decided that tinsmithing would be compatible with his disability and that there would be a local demand for the work he did. To carry out their plan, they needed to find a local craftsman who could train Helman. The volunteer found Soza Mphevu, a tinsmith in another village. He welcomed the disabled man to his workshop, but later commented: "At first I expected payment, but it dawned on me that I was actually playing an important part and will be one of those to help this person become self-reliant. I am proud of it."

Now Helman Senza makes and mends enough cooking-pots and water pails to bring in a regular income and support himself.

Lewis Msasa, a community rehabilitation officer with the Malawi Council for the Handicapped, explains: "The aim of our programme is to help people to help themselves and to become self-reliant within their community after being trained by community members."

This article is reprinted from the new United Nations publication entitled *The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons: A Decade of Accomplishment (1983—1992)*

At the start of the UN Decade of Disabled Persons, community-based methods were little more than an idea, but by the 1990s they had become the favoured solution. This evolution was inevitable, as rehabilitation institutions simply could not cope with the demand for training, and often did not teach the appropriate vocational skills for an independent life. Their services were costly and not very effective, and they were rarely located in villages, so disabled people had to leave their families to attend training courses. But the Decade brought policy makers, planners, economists, social scientists, rehabilitation professionals and disabled people together in constructive debate, and the growth of community-based work accelerated.

Ten years ago, most rehabilitation centres were self-contained institutions with staff, equipment, standard assessment tests and training syllabuses, but with little or no contact with the world of work outside. Today many centres provide outreach services to disabled people, offer part-time courses, operate mobile rehabilition teams, or act as resource centres for training craft instructors and other vocational rehabilitation professionals.

Mustapha Hasan experienced something of this new flexibility when he attended a rehabilitation centre in Yemen.

As a toddler he fell downstairs at home and suffered a severe injury which left him deaf. He grew up in the city of Taiz, where his father is a judge and his older bothers are officers in the police and the military. This well-off family could easily have made the mistake of over-protecting Mustapha and not allowing him to go out to work and grow. But when he was 19 his father arranged for him to attend a vocational rehabilitation centre in Sana'a, about 400 kilometres from his home.

He showed an aptitude for carpentry, and developed skills with tools and timber. Many rehabilitation programmes provide training, but fail to assist trainees in finding paid employment. This training centre arranged for a commercial workshop in Sana'a to "employ" Mustapha as a carpenter every afternoon, enabling him to polish his skills and increase his confidence.

Mustapha learned skills as a carpenter, and confidence as an employee. With the training completed, he returned to his home town and now has a permanent job in a local carpentry business.

High on the list of disabled people's policy priorities is full participation in the open labour market and equal recognition as employees. ILO fully supports these aspirations. Open employment for a disable person, working alongside other colleagues, is a challenge for developing countries where employers can often choose from a large pool of unemployed people. Open employment, however, remains an important goal for equalizing opportunities for disabled persons.

ILO is committed to ensuring the participation of disabled people in the mainstream of society, notably in training and employment. On 20 June 1983, the annual International Labour Conference of the ILO adopted the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention (Convention 159). It has been ratified by 39 member countries, which undertake to observe and promote specified "principles of vocational rehabilitation and employment policies for disabled persons".

The Convention reuqires national rehabilitation policies to accommodate all categories of disabled people, to provide equal opportunities between disabled and other workers, and to promote employment opportunities in the open labour market. To carry out the Convention's provisions, representatives of employers, workers and organizations of and for disabled people are to be involved.

Convention 159 has helped influence national legislation and policies in serveral countries. Cameroon, China, France, Poland and the United States have each modified existing laws or introduced new legislation. Convention 159 is encouraging other countries to review the legal protection they give their disabled population on matters of access to skills training, equality in the labour market, job security and career advancement.

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1267—August 1992—6M